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ABSTRACT

This study reflects the view of three key state education groups concerning the perceived superintendent applicant crisis. One group consists of 37 elected and appointed chief state school officers, a second of 42 executive directors of the American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) state affiliates, and a third of 31 executive directors of the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) state affiliates. Key information reported includes the finding that a majority of chief state school officers and AASA and NSBA executive officers agree that a superintendent applicant pool crisis exists in their states, and that the quality of superintendent applicants is decreasing. An increase in board member turnover is affecting many states, which creates problems in leadership stability and likely plays a role in superintendent turnover. Policy changes that might attract more superintendent applicants include higher pay, portable pensions, community support, and paid internships. State policymakers need to consider taking steps to provide higher superintendent pay and to develop portable interstate pension and retirement plans; developing programs that provide year-long, paid internships for aspiring superintendents; promoting stronger superintendent preparation programs at state institutions of higher learning; and conducting further research to ascertain factors that promote attracting and retaining applicants. (RT)

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700 Broadway, Suite 1200 Denver, CO 80203-3460 303.299.3600 Fax: 303.296.8332 www.ecs.org

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The University of Memphis

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State Education Leaders View the Superintendent Applicant Crisis

Thomas E. Glass
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The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has commissioned Thomas E. Glass to design and conduct a series of leadership issue papers to gather information on issues relating to superintendent and school board leadership. These national studies build on a decade of work conducted by the American Association of School Administrators and focus not only on characteristics and demographics of the superintendency, but also on the status of school board/superintendent relations and functions. First, the exact problems need to be identified through data collection, then, solutions need to be articulated. Following is the third commissioned paper. For more information, contact Katy Anthes, policy analyst, Education Commission of the States, 303-299-3635.

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Overview and Findings

Leadership is important for organizational success. In public schools, the leadership function is carried out through a hierarchical bureaucratic model. Various leadership and decisionmaking activities occur between hierarchical levels of elected (appointed) school boards, superintendents, principals and teacher leaders. The titular professional leader is the superintendent.

The national school reform dialogue, however, has only recently included the role of professional superintendents and boards of education. Many reformists currently view the role of superintendent as being key to creating district environments susceptible to substantive reform. At this moment of deserved recognition, there are serious concerns from the political sector, professional associations and academic circles about the current and future viability of the superintendency. This new concern is simultaneous to numerous reports of superintendent applicant shortages, growing numbers of retirements and declining quality among those entering the superintendent profession. Potentially exacerbating the shortage are impending superintendent retirements and the fact that some school reformists have been successful in convincing many states to make certification more difficult for aspiring new superintendents.

This study reflects the views of three key state education groups concerning the perceived superintendent applicant crisis. The first group consists of 37 of 49 elected and appointed chief state school officers. These men and women are responsible for state education agency leadership and are key players in developing education policy and legislation in their states.

The second group is made up of 42 of 49 executive directors of the American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) state affiliates. A large majority of these leaders are former superintendents who have daily contacts with practicing superintendents and are often called to mediate contentious differences between superintendents and boards.

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The third group consists of 31 of 49 executive directors of the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) state affiliates. A few of these executive directors are former superintendents, but most are retired school board members. Some have previous experience in managing professional or governmental agencies.

In addition to gathering data on the perceived status of the superintendent applicant pool, the study describes current superintendency characteristics, such as contract provisions, effectiveness, preparation and gender diversification. The study also points to a growing crisis in both school board turnover and the ability of districts to attract quality board candidates.

The following key information was reported regarding the status of the superintendent applicant pool:

- **Is there a superintendent applicant pool crisis?** A strong majority (approximately 60%) of chief state school officers and AASA and NSBA executive directors agree that a superintendent applicant pool crisis exists in the their state. Only a small percentage are confident that there is no applicant pool problem in their state.
- **Where is the crisis most pronounced?** Overall, 40-50% of the respondents in all three groups perceive a problem in applicant pools for all sizes and types of districts. A lack of quality superintendent applicants, however, was particularly noted in rural, urban and poor school districts. A great many of these districts often serve substantial numbers of minority students.
- **Is the quality of superintendent applicants decreasing?** Approximately 90% of AASA executive directors and 84% of NSBA directors believe the quality of superintendent applicants is decreasing. Approximately one-third of each group responding to the study indicated that programs preparing superintendents either "need improvement" or "need a great deal of improvement." Less than 25% of the respondents rated such preparation programs as "good."
- **How effective are current superintendents?** The vast majority (100% of AASA executive directors and 83% of NSBA executive directors) of respondents indicated that practicing superintendents in their state are either "effective" or "very effective."
- **There is an emerging crisis in school district ability to attract high-quality candidates for school board positions**. In addition, an increase in board member turnover is affecting many states. Board turnover creates problems in leadership stability and likely plays a significant role in superintendent turnover.
- **What types of policy changes might attract more superintendent applicants?**
  - Areas of Agreement
    - Higher Pay: More than 75% of NSBA and AASA executive directors believe increasing superintendent salaries would result in more applicants. Fifty-four percent of the chief state school officers believe superintendents are not adequately compensated.
    - Portable Pensions: There is substantial agreement between chief state school officers and NSBA and AASA executive directors that transportability of state retirement systems would likely increase applicant pools.
    - Community Support: Study respondents believe a lack of community support for schools poses a serious recruitment problem. Ninety-three percent of AASA executive directors and 76% of NSBA directors agree that more community support would result in more superintendent applicants.
    - Paid Internships: A large majority of AASA and NSBA executives acknowledge that providing paid internships to aspiring superintendents could possibly attract more applicants. In addition, 50% of AASA executives and 40% of NSBA executives believe paid internships would "definitely" or "very definitely" attract more applicants.
  - Areas of Uncertainty
    - Changes in Board Governance: While approximately 60% of AASA executive directors believe changes in school board governance would attract more superintendent applicants, only 20% of NSBA executive directors agree. However, nearly two-thirds of chief state school officers believe the present board governance model needs to be seriously restructured.

- Six-year Renewable Contracts: Job stability and frequent turnover are perceived as serious problems facing the superintendency. The AASA and NSBA executives, however, are uncertain of the degree to which six-year renewable contracts would encourage more applicants and reduce turnover.
- Residency Requirements: The study respondents were ambivalent about the effect on the applicant pool of removing requirements that superintendents reside in their school district.

Other findings from the study:

- A majority of the chief state school officers believe more than 30% of superintendents in their state will retired in the next five years. The national turnover rate for superintendents in 2000-01 school years was about 14% according to data collected by Market Data Retrieval and published in their state school directories. This data indicate that 2,096 of the nearly 14,000 superintendents were new to their districts in September 2001. If this trend continues in five years, over 10,000 superintendents will retire or move to other districts.
- The number of women applying for superintendent positions appears to be increasing.
- The results were mixed as to whether "nontraditional" superintendents can be as effective as those coming from traditional education backgrounds. NSBA executive directors were more confident than AASA directors that nontraditional superintendents could be just as effective.

Policy Questions to Consider

The study provides several interesting findings on the current state of the superintendent applicant pool. Of great note is the fact that 60% of chief state school officers and AASA and NSBA executive directors agree that a superintendent applicant pool crisis exists in their state. Even larger percentages of the study respondents believe that the overall quality of superintendent applicants is decreasing. The study findings suggest a series of policy questions which should be considered.

1. Chief state school officers and NSBA and AASA executive directors clearly believe that providing higher pay and portable retirement plans would be effective means of encouraging more applicants for superintendent positions. **State policymakers therefore need to consider taking steps to provide higher superintendent pay and to develop portable, interstate pension and retirement plans.**
2. The study respondents clearly believe that the quality of superintendent applicants is decreasing. Superintendent certification is obtained from state departments of education after completion of a course of study beyond the master's level. Many superintendents have indicated that the most valuable portion of their academic preparation was obtained through a required internship. **Policymakers should explore developing programs that provide year-long, paid internships for aspiring superintendents.** Such internships could fulfill the dual role of encouraging more superintendent applicants and improving the overall quality of the applicant pool.
3. Approximately one-third of each group responding to the study indicated that programs preparing superintendents either "need improvement" or "need a great deal of improvement." Less than 25% rated such preparation programs as "good." In addition, there are very few "pure" superintendent preparation programs at higher learning institutions. Instead, such programs often are lumped into principal preparation programs or other education administration programs. **To improve the quality of new superintendent applicants, state policymakers should explore the development of strategies to promote stronger superintendent preparation programs at state institutions of higher learning.**
4. A large number of AASA executives (mostly former superintendents) believe superintendent and board conflicts are more prevalent today than in the past and that changes in board governance would attract more superintendent applicants. A large number of NSBA executives (mostly former board members), however, do not believe that such conflicts are more prevalent today or that the board governance model needs to be changed. The disparity of these results seems to suggest a disconnect in communication between many superintendents and their boards. Such a disconnect likely increases the chances of conflict and reduces the desirability of the superintendency to future applicants. **State policymakers should review the present school board governance model to determine what types of changes are called for to ensure greater effectiveness. Policymakers**

should review the current roles of school boards and superintendents and work to create binding board/superintendent protocols. Perhaps most instructive for state policymakers should be the fact that nearly two-thirds of chief state school officers participating in this study believe the present board governance model needs to be seriously restructured.

5. This study's findings point to an emerging crisis in the ability of school districts to attract high-quality candidates for school board positions. The study also indicates that an increase in board member turnover is affecting many states. An inability to attract high quality board members can promote ineffective and inefficient working relations between the superintendent and the board and can serve to discourage new entrants into the superintendent profession. In addition, an increase in board turnover creates problems in leadership stability and likely plays a significant role in superintendent turnover. **Further research is needed to ascertain the types of policies that would be most effective in attracting high-quality school board candidates and in reducing board turnover.**

6. Study respondents clearly believe a lack of community support for schools poses a serious superintendent recruitment problem. **Policymakers should explore the development of strategies to promote positive interaction between school leaders and members of each community.** Community support in many states is translated into "windows of opportunity" to increase tax rates, improve programs and replace/build new facilities. A supportive and involved community is a key to improving student engagement and achievement. Certainly, community support results in fewer conflicts and likely provides a morale boost to the superintendent and staff.

7. Job stability and frequent turnover are perceived as serious problems facing the superintendency. Six-year renewable contracts have been suggested as a potential tool to promote leadership stability and to encourage more applicants to the superintendency. The AASA and NSBA executives participating in this study were uncertain of the degree to which such six-year renewable contracts would encourage more applicants and reduce turnover. **Further research is needed to ascertain the effectiveness of six-year renewable contracts on increasing the superintendent applicant pool.**

Thomas Glass is professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Memphis. He is the lead author of "The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000: The Superintendent in the New Millennium" and sole author of "The American School Superintendency 1992, America's Education Leaders in a Time of Change." Both of these national studies were published by the American Association of School Administrators. He is a former superintendent of schools and former faculty member at Washington State University, Northern Illinois University and the University of Detroit.

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